

# **What Are the Prospects for a Social Democratic Alliance in India Today?**

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Simons Papers in Security and Development

No. 41/2015 | March 2015

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The series is supported by the Simons Foundation.

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Harriss, John, *What Are the Prospects for a Social Democratic Alliance in India Today?* Simons Papers in Security and Development, No. 41/2015, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, March 2015.

ISSN 1922-5725

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## What Are the Prospects for a Social Democratic Alliance in India Today?

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### Abstract:

This is a draft chapter for a book comparing experiences of social democracy in India and Scandinavia. The further informalisation of the Indian economy that is occurring, while it may lead to the renewal of union activity in some sites, and to the sharpening of protests against inequality, has shifted the focus of trade union activity from demands made upon capital and workplace rights to demands made upon the state for (minimal) social welfare guarantees. Social and environmental movements championed by the middle classes have had success defending the social and economic rights of the poor and dispossessed against capital projects, but without overcoming fragmentation across interests and issues. More recently, broader protest politics have targeted corruption and the established party system, but not the country's liberal economic policies – and participation of the working poor and marginalized groups has been low. A possible exception is the electoral success in 2015 of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi, which promised the deepening of democracy in the pursuit of social justice. It has potential to occupy the social democratic space in Indian politics that has been largely vacated by the mainstream left. Whether the AAP can realise this transformative potential will probably depend upon its ability to sustain the alliance between an important fraction of the 'mass middle class' and the mass of the working poor.

### About the author:

John Harriss is a social anthropologist and a professor at the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University, which he directed in 2006–2013. He has published extensively on the politics and the political economy of South Asia, and of India in particular. Harriss was Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement* in 2010–2014. Before 2006 he headed the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at the London School of Economics.

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## What Are the Prospects for a Social Democratic Alliance in India Today?

The articulation of left-inclined political parties with a broad coalition of social forces in the pursuit of socially transformative politics – rather than for the pursuit of particular group interests – was the foundation of Scandinavian social democracy.<sup>1</sup> Up to a point, certainly, Kerala had the same experience in the 1930s through 1950s, when the Communist Party of India (the CPI, then undivided) initiated India's most significant experiment in social democracy. The Kerala Party – in contrast with the CPI in Bengal – was to an important extent actually born of the broad-based social reform movements that had developed in that part of India, and it continued to work with a range of organized groups from within civil society. The aim of this paper is to assess the prospects in India now for the formation of a broad alliance capable of providing a basis for socially transformative democratic politics within a market economy.

On the one hand the prospects of the left movement in the country have dimmed, as support for it has rather withered than expanded. Given the pattern of the country's economic development – its 'tortuous transition', as Bardhan describes it (2009) - India never has had a mass working class movement, and Indian labour has been even further fragmented under the impact of liberal economic reforms. Left parties failed to build a strong base of support amongst working people or the middle classes, outside a few enclaves, and (not only in India) have seemed bereft of ideas to counter neoliberalism (e.g Bardhan 2011). On the other hand the sphere of civil society activism is generally – even if not entirely so – dominated by middle class groups and interests, and tends to be compromised in bargaining for piecemeal social reforms (the concept of the 'middle classes' in the Indian context is discussed in the Appendix to this paper). But there is also a congeries of social movements and organisations that have mobilized around particular issues or interests. A case in point is that of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft chapter for a book with the provisional title *Reinventing Social Democratic Development: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Experiences*, which is being edited by the author with Olle Törnquist and Fredrik Engelstad (both University of Oslo). The draft was presented at workshops held in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in March 2015.

coalition of more than 200 grassroots and activists' organisations from across the country that was instrumental in the legislation of the Forest Rights Act in 2006<sup>2</sup>. In this case a networked movement was created 'by combining grassroots place-based struggles of marginalized people with flexible, open-ended networking across space and scale' (Kumar and Kerr 2012: 753). The National Alliance of People's Movements aims at similar mobilisations<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, what now are the possibilities for the mobilization of workers in support of a social democratic project? What might be made of the many disparate mobilisations of different groups of people in different parts of the country, including those articulated by the CPI (Maoist), against Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and other appropriations of land in the interests of 'accumulation by dispossession' (and of the kind that have sometimes been brought together by the National Alliance of People's Movements)? There can be no doubt about the extent of protest in India today – much of it directed against appropriations of land - undertaken by many different groups, across most of the country. Is there a way of bringing together such movements with progressive organisations in civil society, in a new political project of social transformation – a coherent Polanyian counter-movement to the renewed attempt, through the pursuit of neoliberal policies, to make a reality of the utopian idea of the self-regulating market? And in this context what should we make of the recent waves of public protest over corruption, orchestrated at first by the India Against Corruption movement; then against rape and violence against women; and most recently in the meteoric rise and fall and rise again of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). It appears that at least in Delhi AAP has become a broad based popular movement. The questions now are those of whether the Party can sustain the alliance between poor working people and fractions, at least, of the middle classes that won it such an astounding victory in the

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Users (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006'.

<sup>3</sup> The NAPM describes itself thus: 'an alliance of progressive people's organisations and movements, who while retaining their autonomous identities, are working together to bring the struggle for primacy of rights of communities over natural resources, conservation and governance, decentralised democratic development and towards a just, sustainable and egalitarian society in the true spirit of globalism. We stand against corporate globalisation, communalism and religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, casteism, untouchability and discrimination of all kinds. We believe an alliance emerging out of such a process with shared ideology and diverse strategies can give rise to a strong social, political force and a National People's movement. In its quest for a larger alliance, beyond the people's movements, NAPM also reaches out to integrate various civil society organisations and individuals working towards similar goals'.

Delhi elections early in 2015<sup>4</sup>, and secondly whether it will systematically pursue social democratic politics.

The chapter proceeds by first examining trends in labour politics; then the state of the politics of social movements; and finally the politics of the middle classes.

## **The Contemporary Politics of Indian Labour**

The labour movement in India has often been dismissed as not being a ‘movement’ at all, because of the political ties of trade unions which have been seen as bringing about fragmentation, causing conflict among them, and subordinating the representation of workers’ interests to political goals. This frequently expressed argument has been subjected to an effective critique in recent research by Emmanuel Teitelbaum (2006, 2011), who has shown how these notions of fragmentation and of political interference have been overestimated. In a similar vein, Rohini Hensman (2010) has documented how the trade unions have fairly successfully staved off changes in labour law sought by neoliberal policy makers who have been concerned to introduce greater ‘flexibility’ into Indian labour markets – even if the unions have not been able to stem the contraction of formal employment.

There is an irony in neoliberal globalization. In many sectors of the economy companies look for the maximum flexibility in hiring and firing labour – for ‘labour on tap’, as *The Economist* described it – and so seek to deny union rights. And there is no doubt that, not just in India, there has been extensive informalisation of work, extending into what have historically been well protected, secure jobs taken up by well-educated middle class people (so creating what Standing has called a ‘precariat’). The irony is that these developments may also encourage renewed struggles for unionisation, even leading the remaining ‘organised workers’ to seek alliances with the mass of those who are informally employed. Informalisation may be seen to be a common foe by both organised and unorganised groups of workers (Shyam Sundar 2015: 44). And it has been observed that in India, as ‘employers looked for green fields for investment,

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<sup>4</sup> AAP’s victory in the 2015 Delhi election was the biggest political landslide in India’s electoral history, save for three elections in Sikkim (*The Hindu*, February 11 2015).

trade unions looked for green fields for unionisation (2015: 49). Unions have faced ever greater difficulties in the older urban centres, but have found new sites for activism in such newly industrialised areas as Sriperumbudur (outside Chennai), in Gurgaon-Manesar (outside Delhi), in Ghaziabad, or in sites on the outskirts of Bangalore. Shyam Sundar reports on remarks of the General Secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress, made in 2013, about ‘New opportunities [which] have come to expand AITUC’, associated with ‘new industrial zones that are coming up around different cities’. And Shyam Sundar himself argues that the newly industrialised areas ‘have become the battleground for establishing trade unions and ... social laboratories for the emergence of new models of employment relation’ (2015: 49).

This is in a context, in India, in which as the same author shows, the idea that industrial conflict has quieted down in the post-reform period, can be shown to be a myth. It is true that the frequency of work stoppages has declined but their duration and size has increased, at least until recently (and Shyam Sundar marshalls evidence to question the adequacy of the statistical data on this apparent change in the trend-line). Data from the International Labour Office for the period 2005–08 show that India is amongst the top five countries in the world for number of workdays lost per 1000 employees. Of course it is true that the share of contract labour in total employment in the organized factory sector has increased considerably, from 13 per cent in 1992–93 to about 33 per cent in 2009–10, but struggles over the formation of unions and against the employment of contract labour have ‘rocked industrial relations in many firms in the second half of the 2000s’ (2015: 47), and they underlie much of the violence that has occurred in recent years, as workers have fought against the denial of fundamental labour rights<sup>5</sup>. Indian workers are certainly resisting informalisation, and the unions are also widening their agendas ‘to include systemic issues [for example, general economic issues such as inflation and the efficiency of the public distribution system] in a manner not seen before’ (2015: 49).

The widening of the unions’ agendas extends to more vigorous attempts to organise amongst informal workers. In December 2013, it was reported that – though the rally was very

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<sup>5</sup> One of the most notorious episodes of violence involved workers in a Honda plant in Gurgaon in July 2005 (Sehgal 2005). In January 2015 photographs of Korean managers of a company in Sriperumbudur manhandling striking workers sparked outrage. See <http://kafila.org/2015/01/17/trampling-on-workers-rights-in-sriperumbudur> (accessed January 27 2015).



largely ignored in the mainstream media - ‘nearly a lakh of workers, predominantly from the unorganised sector, marched to Parliament to demand a minimum living wage, social security measures and regularisation of work. The call had been given by trade unions across the political spectrum ...’ (Ramani 2013: 12). This followed from presentations of demands made by trade unions jointly over several years, and a 48-hour general strike in February 2013 which had led the government to establish a special ministerial committee to deal with workers’ demands. In the context of the rally A. K. Padmanabhan, the General Secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (the CPI-M affiliated CITU), argued that ‘the largest number of members mobilized in all trade unions are from the unorganised sector. There is a general tendency to state that the central trade unions are only connected to the organised sector. But 65 per cent of the members of ... CITU consist of unorganised workers’ (quoted by Ramani 2013: 13). There may be special pleading in this claim – and it is hard to accept that India is yet witnessing the development of the social movement unionism that has been so effective in Brazil in particular (Seidman 1994) – but it is certainly indicative of an awareness of the scope for interaction between organised and unorganised workers. It is important, certainly, not to exaggerate. A report in the *Economic and Political Weekly* from almost twenty years ago spoke of ‘recent developments’ in the union movement in which the writer saw combined ‘ideological commitment and practical integrity bringing together the organised and unorganised sector workers in a wider movement’ (Wilson 1996: 16). The potential of a much wider, inclusive labour movement is still a very long way from being realized, but it remains there, and there are signs – as in Padmanabhan’s statement – of some progress.

But the demands that were put before Parliament by the workers’ demonstration of December 2013 - demands for a minimum wage of ‘not less than Rs 10 000 per month linked with the consumer price index’, for an ‘assured pension for the entire population’, and other social security measures – were demands made upon the state by the workers, not demands made directly upon capital, or for workplace rights. This is in line with what Rina Agarwala has reported of the significant numbers of informally employed workers who are actually ‘organised’, as were construction workers, and the women bidi workers in her study (2013). In some states of India competitive electoral politics (in Tamil Nadu, in her research, as opposed to West Bengal) have made for conditions in which some groups of informally employed workers

have been able to secure significant welfare benefits, through state intervention. Agarwala's own assessment of these developments is distinctly nuanced. She thinks that the movements she has studied 'may reflect a global trend toward social movement unionism', and that 'a modern blend of class politics may now be finding a new echo in, of all places, the informal economy' (2013: 204-5). At the same time she recognizes the compromise with neoliberalism, saying, for instance, that '[T]heir acknowledgement and protection of informal workers have enabled populist leaders in Tamil Nadu to pursue liberal economic reforms by assuring support from the very groups most disaffected by the reforms' (2013: 113). And this is how some scholars in Tamil Nadu regard the state's outstanding performance – by comparison with other states – in terms of the delivery of social welfare. M. Vijayabaskar, for example, argues that:

though the emerging social regime in Tamil Nadu appears to go against the tenets of neo-liberal reforms that mandate cut-backs in public provisioning of social services, the state has been able to shift the question of labour welfare away from the workplace to the lived spaces, from the domain of capital to the domain of government of dispossessed populations. *This shift partly ensures that capital accumulation can now proceed unencumbered by the burden of protecting workers' livelihoods* (Vijayabaskar 2011: 44, emphasis added).

State provisioning of welfare for the masses of informally employed workers in Tamil Nadu is ultimately supportive of that state government's energetic pursuit of neoliberal policy and its close connections with capital<sup>6</sup>. Successive governments of Tamil Nadu, led variously by the AIADMK and the DMK, have always been ready to repress labour rights<sup>7</sup>. And as Supriya RoyChowdhury has argued, in regard to Agarwala's arguments: the 'assertion that informal workers are acting as a class by seeking welfare from the state, but refraining from wage related demands from their private employers, is very troubling as it fails to address the central issue of income poverty' (2014: 81).

RoyChowdhury – for long a close observer of industrial relations in India – is generally more pessimistic than Shyam Sundar or Rina Agarwala about the state of working class politics. She concludes – for example, from studies of industrial disputes in Bangalore – that '[T]he

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<sup>6</sup> The relations between the two leading parties of the state, the DMK and the ADMK, with some big corporate groups might well be described in terms of 'crony capitalism'.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example the report on recent events in Sriperumbudur referred to in note 3.

struggle of industrial workers is now mostly framed within the paradigm of firm-based activities. What is absent is both a movement character in the activities of trade unions, and a broad class-based character in workers' struggles .... The character of the trade union movement ... underlies the absence of class activism in workers' struggles' (2010: 183). And, contrary to what is suggested by the statement of the General Secretary of the CITU, quoted earlier, RoyChowdhury found in a study of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangalore that '[T]he mainstream trade unions, including those on the traditional left like CITU ... have not engaged in a sustained manner with grassroots issues in the RMG'. She goes on to say that '[I]n the absence of alliances with other unions and political parties such struggles at local level do not translate into an imagination, let alone a moment, of political resistance, and larger mobilizations, despite the New Trade Union Initiative's (NTUI)<sup>8</sup> articulation of the need for this at the national level' (2014: 87).

Supriya RoyChowdhury questions the idea that 'the issue of welfare [can] really be addressed, as it is now being done in the development discourse, as distinct from the domain of work' (2014: 89). She looks, therefore, to 'bring class back in', but clearly argues that there remains a long way to go in building a working class movement in India. Her arguments, and perhaps those of Vijayabaskar, have to be set on the scales against those of Agarwala, in particular. The two writers are implicitly or explicitly critical of the shift – in Vijayabaskar's words – of 'the question of labour welfare away from the workplace to the lived spaces, from the domain of capital to the domain of government of dispossessed populations'. Yet isn't this exactly what successful welfare states have done, enhancing the productivity of labour as they have done so? Is there not more of a basis for broad unity of working people around mobilisations aimed at securing social rights and good public services than there is around

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<sup>8</sup> NTUI is an 'independent trade union federation which over the last decade has especially concentrated on organizing informal workers' (RoyChowdhury 2014: 87). On its website NTUI says that it 'believes in the promotion of organisation of unorganised labour on the basis of the unity of interest at the industrial or sectoral level .... It strives to secure legislation, policies and practices to actualise internationally accepted human and labour rights, eliminate authoritarian and feudal institutions, practices and values and promote labour rights, democratic values, the dignity of labour and equality at the workplace and in society. In doing so, NTUI believes that it is essential to associate with non-union organisations that share the broad aims and objectives of NTUI and contribute effectively to unionisation, collective bargaining, and campaigns. Given this understanding NTUI, since its founding, has been committed to advancing not only its trade union alliances but also building social alliances with social movements and people's organisations' (accessed at [www.ntui.org.in/](http://www.ntui.org.in/) 29 January 2015).

workplace issues – given uneven industrialization and the extent of informalisation of labour in the Indian economy? This seems to be Agarwala's position, welcoming the tripartite negotiations that have taken place in Tamil Nadu between labour alliances, state and capital. This assumes, of course, social democratic objectives, and the regulation rather than the replacement of capitalism.

## **The Politics of Social Movements**

India has a rich history of social movements – a term which refers to 'collective mobilizations, informed of an ideology to promote change, or stability, using any means – violent or non-violent – and functioning with at least an elementary organizational framework' (Oommen 2010: 11). Apart from the Congress movement that struggled for India's independence from colonial rule – which probably has a good claim to having been the greatest social movement in history – India has seen a long history of diverse social movements: religious, caste, linguistic, regional, tribal, peasant, landless, labour, women's, students', civil liberties, environmental ... the list is a long one.

There is room for debate over whether organizations such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), or the Right to Food Campaign, both of which have played an extremely important role in pressing for the passage of the important recent legislation that has given Indians rights to work and to food, should be considered to be 'social movements', since they have actually mobilized relatively few people and have rather worked through the use of legal instruments or through lobbying (Ruparelia 2013; Jenkins 2013). But if we grant that they do have at least something of the character of 'collective mobilizations, informed of an ideology to promote change' then we can recognize that members of the middle classes have often played an essential role in important social movements in the present and the recent past – as they have also, for instance, in the MKSS (Mazdur Kishan Shakthi Sangathan) which was such an important driver of the movement that eventually secured the passage of the Right to Information Act of 2005, or in the Narmada Bachao Andolan that has struggled for so long against the vast Sardar Sarovar water and power projects, in western India, which have displaced so many people. These last are very significant movements that have involved large numbers of people,

but in which middle class leaders – such as Aruna Roy in the case of MKSS, and Medha Patkar in the NBA – have been prominent.

But there are also very many social movements that have arisen from below, from amongst tribal people threatened with displacement to make way for projects of one kind or another, from amongst fishworkers, or amongst former mill workers in Mumbai. Latterly, struggles over land have seen the mobilizations of very many peasants and tribal people, across the country, as they have resisted ‘accumulation by dispossession’ – when the state has been actively involved in attempts to further the interests of capital accumulation by dispossession of land and other resources. As Michael Levien has reported:

‘land wars’ have led to the cancellation, delay or downsizing of projects across the country, including two massive Special Economic Zones [SEZs] for Reliance Industries outside of Mumbai and Gurgaon, the South Korean POSCO steel SEZ in Orissa (supposed to be India’s largest ever foreign direct investment) and all the SEZs approved in Goa (Levien 2012: 934).

Kundan Kumar (2014) has described the activities of a number of social and environmental movements in Odisha, in which concerns about social justice and ecology converge in resistance to capital: the Chilika Bachao Andolan, mobilized in 1991–93 against intensive prawn farming, involving fishermen and other local communities, and supported by student groups and environmental activists; the Gopalpur Andolan against land acquisition for a Tata steel plant, mobilized in 1995–98, involving small peasants and supported by the CPI and environmental activists from Odisha and beyond; the Kashipur Movement of tribal peasantry against bauxite mining and refinery (1994–2008), which won support internationally; Niyamgiri Movement against bauxite mining and refinery (2003 onwards), involving adivasis and dalits in the refinery area and supported by a wide range of external organisations, including one Maoist group; the Anti-POSCO Movement, against the proposed steel plant (2006 onwards), involving peasants and fishing communities, and also supported by a range of outside groups, including the CPI; the Narayanapatna movement against land alienation and exploitation by non-tribals (2006 onwards) involving tribal peasants and landless, and supported by another Maoist group; and the Kalinganagar movement against displacement for an industrial estate, and mainly the Tata steel plant (2005 onward), involving tribal peasantry and a Maoist group (Kumar 2014, Table 1, and

text). This list gives an impression of the extent and tenacity of resistance to dispossession in one state of India, admittedly one in which ‘[T]he flow of extractive capital into ... resource-rich rural areas ... has accentuated social differentiation and exclusion’ (Kumar 2014: 70). The list also gives an indication of the connections between India’s Maoists, now organized across a swathe of the centre and the east of the country, and local movements of resistance to capital and to the state. It is not, generally, that the Maoists have organized resistance to projects like that a Kalinganagar, but they have both tried to take movements over and may sometimes have won support from them. Their involvement, however, has made it easy for the state government in Odisha to paint the movements as ‘Maoist’, and this has allowed the state to justify its use of force against them. As Kumar argues (and the point is of wider relevance than to Odisha alone), the way in which the state has acted against the movements shows its pro-business tilt, in spite of its rhetoric of being pro-poor: ‘The contradiction between democracy, citizenship and capital in India is highlighted ...’ (2014: 72).

The vibrancy of social movements – or of what may be referred to as ‘grass-roots’, or ‘people’s movements’ (Sangvai 2007), or as ‘non-party political formations’<sup>9</sup> – is replicated across much of the country. A scholarly observer of Indian politics, D. L. Sheth, noted some years ago that ‘Movement politics articulates a new discourse of democracy through a sustained political practice’ – a practice that is critical of ‘prevalent macro-structures of political representation’ (2004: 56). And people who are deeply involved in collective political action locally may, especially if different groups are linked together in trans-local networks – as they are in the Campaign for Survival and Dignity – be very effective in changing the way the state works (as in the case of the Forest Rights Act). This is the hope that underlies the establishment in 1992 of the National Alliance of People’s Movements, which now includes over 200 affiliated organisations, together with 27 fraternal organisations<sup>10</sup>. It is also to be set against Kumar’s pessimistic conclusion from Odisha that ‘There is little reason to hope that the juggernaut of extraction will be stopped because of the actions of a few thousand people’ (2014: 72).

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<sup>9</sup> This is the terminology used by the late Rajni Kothari in many publications.

<sup>10</sup> According to the website <http://www.napm-india.org> (accessed February 2 2015).

How might this movement activism be linked with a struggle for social democracy? On the one hand there are arguments advanced by Alf Gunvald Nilsen who, on the basis of his studies of movements of tribal people in western Madhya Pradesh, suggests that they experience both ‘enablement’ and ‘constraint’ as they engage with the state and the vocabularies of democratic rights and citizenship. He concludes that ‘the best way for social movements in India to advance their oppositional projects is *to harness the state to their attempts to deepen democracy* and advance subaltern emancipation’ (2012: 615, emphasis added). But people’s movements have not yet, anyway, articulated an agenda of socially transformative politics, and many eschew any relationship with political parties (the ‘prevalent macro-structures of political representation’). As I also observed in regard to the politics of labour in India, social democracy is about the regulation, not the replacement of capitalism, in order that the market economy is (in Polanyian terms) re-embedded in society, and made to serve human needs. Is it possible that the huge potential of movement from below, which at the moment is fragmented between different interests and issues, might be brought together in common struggles for the realization of social citizenship?

The editors of an earlier set of studies of *Social Movements in India* (Ray and Katzenstein 2005) reached a fairly similar conclusion – though these were studies of the quite well organized women’s, dalits’, environmental and farmers’ movements, and NGOs, rather than of the more localized movements that I have referred to. Ray and Katzenstein say:

The redistributive agenda that emerges from the interaction between social movements and the state in India generally bears little resemblance to the Kerala experience in which competitive party politics and popular mobilization have produced significant land reform and a process of decentralization that has encouraged further popular participation.... But social movement politics, perhaps more than any other institutional space (the courts, the parliament, even party politics) is a domain in which the language of anti-poverty remains extant. Whether these movements can survive as abeyance structures – the holding vessel for the egalitarian conscience of India – remains to be seen (2005: 26).

But now the point is whether the movements can be more than a vessel for an ‘egalitarian conscience’ but actually supply a base for constructing a more egalitarian society, one in which there is greater social justice, as well as more active participation in politics – in the way that Kerala once showed is possible in India.

## **The Politics of the Middle Classes**

The histories of social democracy both in Scandinavia and in the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal show the importance of the alliance between workers, urban and rural, and the middle classes. A critical problem that the left in Kerala, for example, has confronted in recent years has been the alienation from it of the middle classes (see chapter 4). One of the reasons, in social democracies, for supporting the principle of universalism in regard to services supplied by the state is that this can help to ensure the political support of the middle classes for social democratic policies. Where now do the Indian middle classes<sup>11</sup> stand?

In 2014 the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Narendra Modi, achieved a remarkable victory in the General Election. Commentary at the time, confirmed in subsequent analysis of election survey data, points to the central role of Mr Modi himself in the BJP victory, and to the significance of the emphasis that he placed throughout on economic development, often referring to the example of his state of Gujarat. It seems clear that Modi's platform emphasized the idea of 'opportunity' rather than entitlements to welfare, and that this had a wide appeal amongst Indian voters – in turn reflecting how widespread what we may describe as 'middle class aspiration' has become in Indian society. How does this influence, and how is this reflected in the politics of the middle classes?

### ***Protest Politics***

Some of the most notable political events of recent years in India are those referred to in the introduction to this chapter: the mobilizations around the India Against Corruption campaign led by the Gandhian social worker Anna Hazare, the demonstrations that followed the brutal rape of a young woman from the aspirational middle class, in Delhi in December 2012, and then the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party. In all of them middle class people, many of them young, played a central part. They have a lot in common, as I have argued elsewhere (Harriss 2014), with movements, or moments of protest, elsewhere in the world since 2008 – in Greece, in the Arab

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<sup>11</sup> The reasons why I use the plural, 'middle classes', are explained in the Appendix to this chapter. See also Deshpande (2003), chapter 6, 'The Centrality of the Middle Class'. The same author reviews evidence and argument about the size of the Indian middle classes.



Spring, in Spain, in the Balkans, in London and New York, in Brazil, in Turkey, and in other countries. While each of these events has its own specific features they have in common – as well as a history of spontaneity and the absence, generally, of hierarchical leadership, and the prominent role of middle class youth – the expression of distrust of existing political systems and political elites, often combined with frustration with representative democratic politics. As the young protesters who occupied public places in Spain put it, they stood against ‘democracy without choice’. The movements have mostly sought to compel present regimes to reform themselves rather than aiming to replace them; they have not been driven by coherent programmes of social and political change; and they have seemed to put protest in the place of representative politics.

These general trends were clearly reflected in the protests that followed the terrible incident of rape in Delhi in December 2012, involving especially young, middle class people. They were centred in Delhi but took place across the country, and were spontaneous and non-hierarchical, with no very clear leadership<sup>12</sup>. They were sparked by a particular event that was a savage, bestial offence and an affront to ideas of shared humanity and of human dignity. They were not about toppling the state, but rather about compelling the state to fulfill its function of providing protection for people to lead their own lives. Anger was directed against the state, which was held to have failed India’s women. Political leaders responded with platitudes, or a few of them with frankly sexist remarks. The protests were met with official violence, and what was seen by observers as excessive force (justified by the police on the grounds that the protests had been hijacked by ‘hooligans’). The protest came, in the commentator Pratap Mehta’s view, to be about more than rape: ‘It is now an open, generalized and largely justified contempt of the state’ (*Indian Express*, 26 December 2012). The protest implied rejection of the existing political system, no doubt, but it seems that those involved, like the young participants in the Arab Spring, were looking for ‘refo-lution’ – for the state to reform itself – rather than having revolutionary

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<sup>12</sup> Professor Surinder Jodhka said in an interview that ‘The anti-rape protests did not have a centralized leadership. A leader-driven protest like the Anna/anti-corruption movement was clear about from where authority was driven, but with the anti-rape protests it is difficult to give credit to only a few people’ (Singh 2013: 35).

objectives (this term was coined by Asaf Bayat with reference to the Arab Spring, discussed by Harriss 2014).

### ***A Rupture in Politics: India Against Corruption?***

But it is the anti-corruption movement, and the mobilizations around Anna Hazare in 2011-12, that have been seen by one commentator as perhaps marking ‘a critical moment of rupture in politics’ (Singh 2013: 18). The movement started in 2006-07, with the aim of monitoring the accounts of the Commonwealth Games which were to be held in Delhi in 2010. India Against Corruption (IAC), as the movement came to be known, was led by a group of middle class professionals – lawyers, professors, journalists, engineers – some of whom had become social activists working in different fields, and by such figures as Kiran Bedi<sup>13</sup>, the first woman member of the Indian Police Service, as well as by Anna Hazare<sup>14</sup>. In 2011, in the wake of a series of corruption scandals (over the Games, over mining in Karnataka, the affairs of the Adarsh Housing Society in Mumbai, and the 2G Scam) the movement articulated anger against corporate and official looting of public resources, middle class youth being ‘amongst the most active participants in the street, as well as in cyberspace’ (Singh 2013: 23). To begin with those involved were mainly professional executives and others from the ‘new middle class’, students, young men and relatively fewer young women. As the movement developed it embraced a much wider range of social groups<sup>15</sup>, though ‘the politically organized sections of the Other Backward Classes, dalits and Muslims, came out openly against the movement’ (Banerjee 2011: 12) – and, as Manoranjan Mohanty observed, ‘[T]he absence of collaboration between ... the campaign and peoples’ movements fighting for democratic rights ... was stark’ (2011: 16). With these particular absences, Hazare sparked, to begin with – and with the support of the media, both television and the social media – a spontaneous movement of different groups of people, though

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<sup>13</sup> In January 2015, Ms Bedi became a member of the BJP and shortly afterwards was declared to be the party’s candidate for the chief ministership of Delhi. She and her new party were then roundly defeated in the subsequent state elections.

<sup>14</sup> The central role played by Hazare himself, and the fact that he had a core leadership team around him does distinguish these events from those elsewhere, which have not been focused in the same way around a particular individual.

<sup>15</sup> IAC did successfully bring in a range of social groups, but it did not develop its agenda beyond political corruption – as it might have done, for example, by drawing attention to corruption over land acquisition.

a number of civil society organizations also became involved. IAC gained momentum, and took up the demand for a Lokpal – an ombudsman – with very strong powers to investigate charges of corruption against public officials at whatever level. Anna Hazare’s undertaking of a fast unto death in April 2011, which attracted large numbers of supporters, compelled the government to respond to demands for a stronger version of the Jan Lokpal Bill. Thereafter there was a series of other protest events, involving large numbers of demonstrators, around Hazare’s actions, which were directed against the efforts of government to water down the provisions of the legislation.

The movement was seen as showing up the crisis of representative democracy in India: as one young man put it ‘[I]t is not about supporting one particular party or being against another party. Politics itself is the problem’ (Singh 2013: 24). This thrust of ‘anti-politics’ is of course profoundly political, and it has arisen in a context in which there has for some time been a strong tendency for Indian middle classes to turn away from participation in electoral politics. The extent of distrust amongst the middle classes of popular politics – ‘the politics of din’, as Javeed Alam describes it (2004) – has been reflected in the inverse correlation that has sometimes been observed in India between socio-economic status and voting. It is quite exceptional amongst electoral democracies for poorer, lower class people to be more inclined to vote than those who are wealthier and of higher social status – as has been the case in India.

There is also a particular significance in the cause of correcting corruption. It has become a particular focus in the context of neoliberalism, because it is often represented as being the main reason why neoliberal policies don’t deliver all the benefits that they are supposed to. The assertion that ‘corruption’ – defined by the World Bank as ‘the abuse of public office for private gain’ (World Bank 1997, cited by Jenkins 2014: 43), conveniently avoiding direct reference to corruption in the business world – is the critical problem nicely shields the ideology and practice of neoliberalism from critique. Matthew Jenkins has argued, persuasively, that in a context in which there has come about a big shift<sup>16</sup> ‘in urban middle-class mindsets, in which rational self-interest and consumption are now held up as virtues’:

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<sup>16</sup> This shift was documented in the 1990s by Pavan Varma (1998) in *The Great Indian Middle Class* (Delhi: Viking).

The Anna Hazare Movement is best understood as a middle class mobilization of anti-corruption discourse to protest against certain trends exacerbated by liberalization and deregulation, namely, growing lower class political consciousness and political corruption. The irony is that the movement itself was the culmination of processes

intrinsically linked to market-orientated reform: it drew its support from an increasingly assertive middle class seeking to translate its relative economic affluence into political influence (*ibid*: 47).

What also characterises the Indian anti-corruption movement and distinguishes it from other movements elsewhere is its particular combination of authoritarian elitism with an impulse of direct democracy. Pratap Mehta pointed out that what Hazare and his supporters sought in their then preferred version of the Jan Lokpal Bill was an institution which would represent a tremendous concentration of power, commanded by a few people and who would be selected, in turn, by a small body of people with supposedly unimpeachable credentials. But what would ensure that this body itself would be incorruptible? The whole idea was of a piece with the technocratic impulses of a good many civil society organizations whose ideas and actions imply mistrust of democratic institutions and sometimes an inclination towards an authoritarian elitism (Harriss 2007). Democratic institutions may, at the very least, get in the way of securing the best possible solutions to particular public problems, even if they do not subvert them for the private benefit of particular individuals: as one scholar says, ‘the middle class is most comfortable with the “rule of law” solutions because it circumscribes political discretion’ (Sitapati 2011: 44). Mehta argues, indeed, that the civil society agitation over the Lokpal Bill showed an absolute contempt for representative democracy: ‘the claim that “the people” are not represented by their elected representatives, but are represented by their self-appointed guardians is disturbing’ (*Indian Express*, April 7 2011).

### ***Aam Aadmi***

Yet there was as well, in the anti-corruption movement a searching after the sort of direct democracy that is espoused in some of the people’s movements of India, and this has been seen subsequently in the way in which the Aam Aadmi Party has aimed to operate. The Hazare movement began to lose momentum in 2012, and it was in this context that there came about a split in the leadership group of middle class professionals – between those who followed Hazare in resisting the idea of entering formal politics, as being inconsistent with their rejection of the current political system, and those who followed Arvind Khejriwal in believing that this now had to be the way of carrying the struggle forward. Khejriwal and his supporters formed the Aam

Aadmi Party in November 2012, taking over for the name a term – that of *aam aadmi*, or ‘common man’ – that had been used earlier by the UPA government <sup>17</sup>.

The Party says in a ‘Background’ statement on its website<sup>18</sup> that ‘Our aim in entering politics is not to come to power; we have entered politics to change the current corrupt and self-serving systems of politics forever’. The Party’s principal strategist, the political scientist Yogendra Yadav, speaks frequently about establishing an ‘alternative politics’, involving a much more direct relationship between the people and the decision-making that affects their lives, and implying a level and kind of participation that goes well beyond participation in elections every five years. As the Party says in its Vision statement: ‘We want to create a political system where the political leaders we elect and place in the Parliament are directly responsible to the voters who elected them. Our party’s vision is to realize the dream of SWARAJ that Gandhiji had envisaged for a free India – where the power of governance and rights of democracy will be in the hands of the people of India’. In office in Delhi after the elections of February 2015 AAP promised in its manifesto – entitled ‘70-Point Action Plan’<sup>19</sup> – to legislate ‘the Swaraj Act to devolve power directly to the people. Decisions affecting the local community will be taken by citizens and implemented by their Secretariat ... (etc)’.

AAP envisages realizing its vision partly by means, therefore, that resemble those that Gandhi also advocated, of political decentralization. In the Delhi elections of 2014–15, following the dissolution of the Delhi parliament, AAP launched Delhi Dialogue, described as ‘a unique initiative of drawing up the party manifesto by forging a partnership between the party and the citizens of Delhi’. The party proceeded to organize large numbers of meetings, round-tables and on-line consultations in realizing this aim. The process recalls some aspects of the consultative institutions established in Brazil that have gone some way, at least, towards building deliberative democracy – which is what AAP also seeks<sup>20</sup>. And, as in others of recent movements of protest,

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<sup>17</sup> The name is redolent of populism. What above all else defines populism is an appeal to the idea of ‘the people’, and implicitly if not explicitly, that of ‘the common people’ who are held to have been done down in various ways by elites. There is more than a whiff of populism about the AAP.

<sup>18</sup> [www.aamaadmiparty.org/](http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/) (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>19</sup> The document is available on the website referred to in note 18.

<sup>20</sup> Seekings (2013) provides a comparative study of the ‘Brazilian model’.

AAP attempts to ‘prefigure’ democratic values in the ways in which it works. In a page on the web-site headed ‘How We Are Different’ AAP makes the point that it practises internal party democracy and has no central high command like the other major political parties in India (in the Delhi elections of 2013 and 2015 candidates were selected locally); that it will not allow two members of the same family to contest elections (it opposes ‘dynastic politics’); and that it will not allow special privileges for elected representatives (what it calls ‘the VIP culture, inherited from the British Raj’)<sup>21</sup>. During its short period in office in Delhi in 2013–14, much was made of ‘doing different’ from the established parties in these ways, and of the aspiration to direct democracy.

AAP succeeded in ‘doing different’ when it upset ‘politics as usual’ in the Delhi elections of November 2013, defying all expectations by winning 28 seats, preventing the resurgent BJP from securing a majority, and going on to form the government of Delhi, though briefly, with the support from outside of the Congress Party. Khejriwal’s tenure as Chief Minister was brief but dramatic. It included his staging of public protest against the Union Home Ministry, over control of the police force of the capital. It was at this moment that the Chief Minister declared himself to be an ‘anarchist’ and seemed to be intent on creating a politics of chaos. Shortly afterwards the AAP government resigned when it was unable, in the face of the opposition of both the Congress and the BJP, to introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill in the Delhi parliament. AAP then campaigned vigorously in the general election, fighting more seats than any other party – though in the end with success only in four constituencies in Punjab. There followed a period marked, apparently, by in-fighting when several of the more prominent figures in the party were publicly critical of Khejriwal, and there were several high-profile resignations. The party still seemed to some observers to be in disarray when fresh elections for the Delhi parliament were called. The BJP was initially expected to be on track to winning a big majority. What observers missed was that AAP had consolidated its organization in Delhi, while its elected councilors implemented local schemes with the funds that they were allotted. This, and the apology that Khejriwal offered for

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<sup>21</sup> In line with these concerns the Association for Democratic Reforms found that none of the MLAs elected to the Delhi Assembly in 2015, all but three of the 70 being AAP representatives, had been charged with ‘heinous criminal offences’ – a first – and that the new Assembly had the most members with assets worth less than Rs 1 crore among the last three assemblies (*The Hindu*, February 11 2015).

the error of abandoning power in Delhi earlier, reminded people of the positive achievements of the AAP government in its 49 days, especially with regard to livelihood issues.

What was so striking first in the Delhi elections of 2013, and then again in 2015, was where AAP won electoral support. Though the primary activist base of the party was certainly drawn from the middle classes – professionals, rights activists, teachers, and students – ‘constituencies with a large number of slum clusters/*jhuggies* [almost] invariably voted for the party’ (Ramani 2013: 4). And what explained the support of the poor for AAP was that: ‘By embarking upon a campaign that sought to equate the lack of adequate services to the *jhuggies* to corruption – perceived by the poor as their everyday effort to effect a bargain for themselves – the AAP managed to circumvent the traditional patronage networks and reach out to the poor directly’ (*ibid*: 5). Meanwhile the party appealed to many professional people who saw the need for ‘a non-corrupt force’, and to some amongst ‘the traditional middle class that is linked to the public sector, petty shop owners, small merchants [as well as professionals] which is exasperated with the existing political parties on everyday issues such as inflation, and the lacunas in the public delivery difference’ (*ibid*: 6). It was, as Ramani says, an ‘uneasy coalition’, but exactly the kind of coalition that has to be built if there is to be a social democratic alternative in India. The landslide of 2015 can only have been achieved by the consolidation of the coalition<sup>22</sup>.

Ideas about social justice figure prominently in the programmatic pronouncements of the Party (as in the ‘70-Point Action Plan’ presented to the electorate in 2015) and it has focused on the issues of access to water and electricity, and of their pricing, and on the pricing of gas, which surveys (the National Election Survey of 2009, for instance) have shown to be the most significant issues for voters. These are matters of livelihood that bear on the economic and social rights that were relegated to the non-justiciable Directive Principles of the Constitution of India – to the implementation of which AAP has committed itself. There is no doubt about the significance of what P. K. Datta has called AAP’s ‘politics of practical results, of which the main beneficiaries are the underprivileged’ in accounting for the landslide of 2015. Datta continues,

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<sup>22</sup> The psephologist Sanjay Kumar points out, however, that what also contributed to the AAP victory ‘is the very sharp polarization of the minorities, mainly the Muslims, who constitute 11 per cent of Delhi’s voters’ (‘Interpreting the AAP win’, *The Hindu*, February 11 2015)



‘[T]hese benefits may not be very large .... But it is a visible testament to the fact that voting can make a difference to one’s everyday life – after the elections are over’. He notes ‘[W]hat is surprising ... is that the middle class appears to have been influenced by a wave that was apparent only in the lower sections of the social ladder’, and he speculates that AAP’s ‘politics of delivery’ brings together different classes. There is here, he suggests, ‘a new language of class politics’ that doesn’t threaten the middle class<sup>23</sup>. Quite what he means by this isn’t entirely clear, but it seems that what he has in mind is the widely shared interest in the quality of government and of public services.

Datta’s observations on the reasons for AAP’s victory in 2015 seem sound enough. On the other hand those of Srirupa Roy, who studied AAP closely in the run-up to the 2013 election, suggest that there may be quite a gap between the probably mainly upper and intermediate caste Hindu men from non-working class backgrounds who make up a lot of the rank and file of the party and the majority of those who voted for it. She says that ‘[E]schewing vocabularies of belonging, community and solidarity that usually describe the idea and practice of citizenship, AAP members emphasise the *ownership* ties that bind citizen and state, and invest the owner-citizen with the right to demand answers, accounts and accountability from his government’ (2014: 52, emphasis added). Her account of AAP in action shows that the rank and file members of the party have only a limited recognition of the antinomies of ‘participation’ in the context of a society which is marked both by sharp economic inequalities and by hierarchical social values. There are, inevitably, question marks over whether or not AAP can sustain the coalition on which its electoral success has been built. Much depends on how the AAP government that came into office in February 2015 goes on to function, and on how it is perceived to work. As another commentator wrote at the time of the 2015 election ‘Politics as the search for public goods [rather than the pursuit of power] must now look at services in terms of a new audit of access, quality, participation, everydayness, instead of mere economics .... AAP has to rescue livelihood issues from technocratic and managerial motions of the economy which seek to emphasise security and profit’<sup>24</sup>. Indeed – but ‘mere economics’ have to be looked to as well, and in this

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<sup>23</sup> P.K.Datta ‘The obvious and not-so-obvious reasons for AAP victory’, *The Hindu*, February 10 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, ‘The Return of the AAP’, *The Hindu*, February 9 2015.

regard the ‘70-Point Action Plan’ offers little beyond the bland statement that ‘We will create an ecosystem that enables private industry to create more jobs’. Certainly if AAP is make a substantial pitch for government at the national rather than the city level, it has have a coherent economic policy. The idea of an ‘alternative politics’ depending upon the more direct participation of ‘the people’ in decision-making runs the risk of being exposed as a utopian fantasy so long as the deep inequalities of Indian society remain unaddressed and are exacerbated – as they are – by the pursuit of liberal economic policies. But then critique of the prevailing economic orthodoxy is likely to lead to the loss of support from amongst many of the new middle class individuals who have been drawn to the Party because of its articulation of opposition to the existing political elites<sup>25</sup>. Can AAP develop and stand-by the social democratic agenda that is suggested – if not in name – in the ‘70-Point Action Plan’?

In sum AAP is an instance of the transformation of protest politics into a party-movement that is dedicated to realizing political change. This has depended upon leadership. It is no accident that Arvind Khejriwal came briefly to appear in the campaigning for the general election of 2014 as a kind of a ‘presidential’ figure, just like the leaders of the two main parties, the BJP and the Congress, against whom he was pitted<sup>26</sup>. But whether the new party can sustain its transformative potential, rather than becoming just another political party, will probably depend upon whether or not it is able to sustain the alliance between an important fraction of the ‘mass middle class’ and the mass of the working poor that underlay its extraordinary success in the Delhi elections. Then, can the Party go beyond the local problem-solving at which it seems to be very good, in Delhi, to address questions, for instance, of macro-economic policy? These are key questions to which only the passage of time will provide an answer.

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<sup>25</sup> Points made in this paragraph are all developed in articles by Palshikar (2013) and Shukla (2013)

<sup>26</sup> Of course India’s parliamentary democracy is not a presidential system, and so this reference to Khejriwal and the leaders of the two main parties as ‘presidential figures’ will seem misleading. What I have in mind is that the characters of the party leaders came to figure in the 2014 general election campaign in a way that was much more like the pattern of presidential systems than had been the case before.

## Conclusion

There is no simple answer, therefore, to the simple question that heads this chapter. There seems to be some potential in the labour movement if those in privileged jobs really can come together with the mass of the ‘unorganised’ labour force. There are hints of this taking place, but not much more than that. There is a great churning taking place from below in many parts of the country, and there have been moments, such as that of the passage of the Forest Rights Act, when locally based people’s movements have come together. But thus far there have not been many such moments. Again, there seems to be potential that is still far from being realized. Stronger connections have to be established between the sphere of middle class activism – of the kind that has been instrumental in the passage of much of the recent rights legislation – and that of the people’s movements. Finally, the experience of the AAP in Delhi shows what may be achieved when alliances are built between middle classes and working classes. AAP promises the deepening of democracy in the pursuit of social justice, and it can perhaps occupy the social democratic space in Indian politics that has been left largely vacant as a result of the decline of the mainstream left.

P. K. Datta argues, as I noted earlier, that AAP promises ‘a new language of class politics’. But what he seems to be talking about is a language of politics as ‘a search for public good’, or as citizenship. It has become quite fashionable, for good reason, to make comparisons between India and Brazil<sup>27</sup>. In regard to political developments in Brazil James Holston has written about what he calls ‘insurgent citizenship’, entailing ‘a new kind of participation in an alternative public sphere’ constituted by residents’ own grassroots organisations, new understandings of rights, and a transformed understanding of the relationship between state and citizens. Poor people have appropriated the ‘right to have rights’ (Seekings 2013: 359, citing Holston 2009). The ‘alternative public sphere’ is being created as a result of the excluded poor demanding inclusion. Doesn’t this describe quite well what is taking place in India, too? It is a fair description of an important part of what AAP is trying to do, what the organisations of

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<sup>27</sup> Instances include Seekings (2013) and Aiyar and Walton (2014).

‘unorganised’ workers about which Agarwala writes are engaged in as well, and what Nilsen says of the people’s movements that he has studied. He writes:

When we are dealing with the mobilization of subaltern social groups in the context of everyday tyranny ... then the strategy of claiming citizenship is very likely to be not only a necessary starting point for activism, but also a genuinely radical point of departure for oppositional collective action (2012: 628).

‘Insurgent citizenship’ is going on in India as well as in Brazil. What brings the insurgents together with some from amongst the middle classes, as was seen in Delhi in the 2015 elections, is the demand for political change in the cause of better government and better public services. There is a long way to go toward social democracy, but isn’t this the direction of travel?

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## Appendix: Why ‘Middle Classes’?

The concepts of, on the one hand, ‘the working class’, and on the other that of ‘the middle class’, are incompatible, working classes being defined by their function in the division of labour, while middle classes are defined by their position in a hierarchy (Jeffrey and Harriss 2014: 122). Thus it is, in India, that many attempts have been made to define the middle class in terms of income or, say, the possession of a set of consumer goods. Unsurprisingly there are radically different estimates of the size of the middle class (Despande 2003, chapter 6 supplies a discussion). It seems important, therefore, to try to define what constitutes the middle class in terms of functions in the social division of labour, and of dimensions of power (see Deshpande 2003, chapter 6). Then we may distinguish an important group of people who hold professional, technical and managerial positions, who are not capitalists/‘owners of the means of production’ but who by virtue of the educational and probably the cultural capital they possess have a particular power in relation to capital. This is the elite fraction of the middle class in India that may be referred to as the ‘new middle class’. It is clearly distinguished from another important group of people, the petty bourgeoisie who own some capital, but who are themselves also workers, even if they employ, as they may do, some other people as well. There is then a third, most numerous but clearly subordinate fraction of the middle class, made up by ‘salaried workers who have some educational capital, but do not occupy positions of authority over other workers’ (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 500). Recognising these different fractions, it makes sense to talk in terms of ‘middle classes’.